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RICHARD C. WEST

Humankind and Reality: Illusion and Self-Deception In Peter S. Beagle's Fiction

In Chapter XV of *The Folk of the Air*, there is a crucial scene explaining much of the mystery in which Joe Farrell found himself involved upon his return to Avicenna, California (a fictional analogue of Berkeley). Farrell and Julie Tanakawa rescue Micah Willows, one of the Founders of the League for Archaic Pleasures, from wandering as a street person, and take him to the goddess Sia to be healed.

We learn that two years prior to the action of the novel, Micah had been possessed by the spirit of Mansa Musa, a historical figure whose reign may have been the germ of the legend of Prester John. (Not coincidentally, Prester John was Micah's persona in the League; Beagle is well aware of the importance of names in magic.) This had taken place during a duel to determine the kingship of the League, when an immature but proficient witch cast a spell to prevent Micah from defeating her father. But listen as Hamid, the League historian and bard, explains the significance of this central event to Farrell and to us:

> Yeah, I know what you and I saw Aiffe do, but you got to understand, I have also seen more than a hundred intelligent people steadily denying something she pulled off right in front of their eyes. *Unmaking* it, you hear what I'm saying? Changing him, changing Micah, to fit the story, I saw them doing it. Man, he helped found and organize this whole damn League, and two weeks, three weeks, he was just another crazy black man, gone AWOL, gone native, the way they got this unfortunate tendency to do. . . . You ever want to see the real witchcraft, you watch

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> people protecting their comfort, their beliefs. That's where it is (p. 237).

This theme—call it rationalization, illusion, self-deception, this twisting of unpleasant truths into some more palatable fabrication—is one of the strands woven into Peter S. Beagle's treatment of good and evil throughout his fiction. In *Folk of the Air* it is not only here at the center of events but also detectable on the periphery, as when we are told that there is a rash of resignations from the League by people who will not admit to themselves that they have seen witchcraft (or evil), but who will remove themselves from the source of their psychological discomfort (p. 261). The same thing happens at the end of "Lila the Werewolf," when most of the onlookers who see the wolf transformed into a young woman at dawn somehow manage not to have seen it (*Fantasy Worlds of Peter Beagle*, p. 21).

And I think the theme is present by implication in the two main human antagonists of *Folk of the Air*, the teenage witch Aiffe and her father, Garth de Montfaucon, the man who would be king. Although we are shown only what they do and say and not how they justify their actions and words to themselves, it seems likely that Garth seconds his daughter's machinations partly out of paternal concern for her advancement in the social group they have both chosen, and partly because this parental love enables him to hide from himself his less worthy motive of using her powers to further his own advancement and ego. Fifteen-year-old Aiffe, though she is responsible for the death of one person and the suffering of many others, can be redeemed by Sia in the end partly because this admittedly spoiled brat acts more out of the frustrations of adolescence than diabolical malice. Aiffe, or Rosanna Berry, lashes out at the adult world that hedges in the young, and must believe she is only meeting power with more power. "I just want to get even, that's all," she says (p. 109). I surmise that in her immaturity she displays one of the most common forms of human self-deception: the denial of the other, keeping oneself from accepting that any subject outside one's own ego has real existence and that others have rights and feelings. I think this is implied; it is not spelled out.

But out-and-out villains who do wicked deeds for the sake of being wicked (such as the Duke of Coffin Castle in James

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Thurber's *Thirteen Clocks*, who announces in Chapter 7 that "we all have flaws . . . and mine is being wicked") do not exist in Beagle's fiction. The closest, perhaps, is Nicholas Bonner, Aiffe's not-quite-demon lover. But if he is not a true demon ("I haven't got that down yet," admits Aiffe [p. 109]), neither is he human. On a symbolic level he does represent the evil side of human nature, so that Aiffe's alliance with him amounts to a seduction by the dark side of the Force—even if she does much of the seducing. And even Nicholas is not motiveless in his malignity; being unable to die and also incapable of truly living, however, he is quite plausibly embittered against the world of mortals, who can do both, and against Sia, who brought him into his miserable existence (pp. 274–75).

Beagle's fantasy worlds tend to be governed by the principles of yin and yang: neither good nor evil exists unalloyed. Even the delightful Gertrude Klapper, a very good person usually well aware of when she is rationalizing, is not immune to self-deception. We see her little vanity exposed near the end of *A Fine and Private Place*, when the deceased Morris Klapper complains to Jonathan Rebeck about the huge mausoleum that was built for him against his wishes:

> All I wanted was a nice small stone with my name on it and perhaps a few words of recommendation. Look what I got. A synagogue. A courthouse. . . . The place has "Gertrude Klapper" scrawled all over it. It's a monument to her, not me. . . . Love is not an excuse for bad taste (p. 407).

We know she is dimly aware of this but keeps it from her consciousness, for there is a strong suggestion that "the lady doth protest too much": in an earlier scene she explains proudly and at unnecessary length to Mr. Rebeck that she insisted on a big funeral and a big monument for her husband over the objections of his law partner (p. 301). By providing this "house" for Morris (she always refers to it as such), Mrs. Klapper is trying in her own way to live with the dead, and thus is a fitting mate for Jonathan Rebeck.

Laura Durand, another basically good character in the same book, and one who frequently chides herself for her shortcomings, is aware that she could deceive herself: "If a man loved me

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I would have talked myself into loving him, and I would have loved him very deeply after a while" (p. 377).

Our human capacity for rationalization is boundless. Perhaps the *locus classicus* illustrating this is the sequence in Chapters II–III of *The Last Unicorn* dealing with Mommy Fortuna's Midnight Carnival. The manticore, the satyr, and the rest of the livestock are ordinary animals, and only the spells of the witch, combined with the willingness of the audience to believe, enable them to appear as mythological creatures. The harpy and the unicorn alone are authentic, and ironically they would not be recognized for what they are without the illusion provided by Mommy Fortuna's magic. There is, however, one creature who believes in the seeming-spell put on her, "a small brown spider weaving a modest web across the bars" of her cage:

> [The web] drew the onlookers' eyes—and the unicorn's eyes as well—back and forth and steadily deeper, until they seemed to be looking into great rifts in the world, black fissures that widened remorselessly and yet would not fall into pieces as long as Arachne's web held the world together. The unicorn shook herself free with a sigh, and saw the real web again. It was very simple, and almost colorless.
>
> "It isn't like the others," she said.
>
> "No," Schmendrick agreed grudgingly. "But there's no credit due to Mommy Fortuna for that, You see, the spider believes. She sees those cat's-cradles herself and thinks them her own work. Belief makes all the difference to magic like Mommy Fortuna's. Why, if that troop of witlings withdrew their wonder, there'd be nothing left of all her witchery but the sound of a spider weeping. And no one would hear it" (p. 41).

Illusions, whether magical or psychological, can be maintained only with a great expenditure of effort. Reality surges in when the unicorn opens the cages:

> One after another, she set them all free—the satyr, Cerberus, the Midgard Serpent. Their enchantments vanished as they felt their freedom, and they leaped and lumbered and slithered away into the night, once more a lion, an ape, a snake, a crocodile, a joyous dog. . . . Only the spider paid no mind when the unicorn called softly to her through the open door. Arachne was busy with a web which looked to her as though the Milky Way had begun to fall like snow. The unicorn whispered, "Weaver, free-

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> dom is better, freedom is better," but the spider fled unhearing up and down her iron loom (p. 53).

But not even the spider can maintain her glorious self-deception once the harpy has blown away the web and destroyed Mommy Fortuna and her spells, and the sound that follows Schmendrick and the unicorn from out of the wreck for a long time is "the tiny, dry sound of a spider weeping" (p. 55).

So Schmendrick's prophecy is not entirely accurate: all that is left of the magic carnival is indeed the grief, but someone does hear the spider weeping: Schmendrick himself, and the reader. And though freedom *is* better, it is easy to feel sorry for the spider and her host illusions. Nearly a century ago, Henrik Ibsen argued in *The Wild Duck* that if you took the life illusion away from the average person, you also took away his or her happiness. Joe Farrell, too, wonders whether we are not sometimes better off not knowing the truth. After his discovery that his girl friend is "Lila the Werewolf," he tells his best friend, "I don't think I've ever found out anything about people that I was the better for knowing" (*Fantasy Worlds*, p. 5), and later says "Who wants to know what people turn into?" (p. 11). In *Folk of the Air*, when he learns of the spell placed on Micah in full view of all members of the League For Archaic Pleasures but denied by most of them, he recognizes the desire not to know about such unpleasant things as "My specialty" (p. 220).

There is certainly something to be said for clinging to illusions that make life more palatable. But in general the movement favored in Beagle's fiction is toward escaping from our self-imposed prisons. There is an example in the short story, "Come, Lady Death," where Lady Neville, so callous that she can use the fatal illness of a child as a means to deliver an invitation to Death to attend a society ball, is forced by Death to see herself as she is:

> "There is no one quite so weary of being human, no one who knows better how meaningless it is to be alive, And there is no one else here with the power to treat life"—and she smiled sweetly and cruelly—"the life of your hairdresser's child, for instance, as the meaningless thing it is. Death has a heart, but it is forever an empty heart, and I think, Lady Neville, that your heart is like a dry riverbed, like a seashell. You will be very content as Death . . . " (pp. 206–207).

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When Lady Neville becomes Lady Death, she finds the fulfillment of the thoughtless cruelty of her mortal life, and a punishment for it; she also finds a kind of expiation, for Death does end pain and ugliness for us all.

But Beagle's most extensive treatment of this theme is in *A Fine and Private Place*, particularly in the characters of Michael Morgan and Jonathan Rebeck.

The ghosts of Beagle's fictional Yorkchester Cemetery (modeled on Woodlawn Cemetery near his childhood home in the Bronx) themselves exist by a kind of self-deception, a refusal to admit that they have died. They do not actually walk or talk but can only mimic what they remember it was like when they could. Michael Morgan is especially adamant in clinging to his remembered life. He argues that the human instinct is to throw oneself away from death (p. 293) and insists repeatedly that he shuffled off his mortal coil only because he was murdered by his wife, Sandra. Yet in the end he and we discover that he has been deceiving himself, altering his perception of reality to protect his own comfort and self-image as a man devoted to integrity (one of his favorite words: see p. 250). When the Raven brings the news of the outcome of Sandra's trial, and memory returns, it develops that Michael did poison himself, and, in a confusion of justice and revenge, plan for his wife to be blamed:

> How do you think I feel, knowing that I was bored enough with myself to stop myself, and vengeful enough to try to drag someone with me? Knowing nakedly, without any possible way of shading my eyes from it, that I'm a liar, and a coward, and a murderer in everything but deed? . . . I know what I am. I am everything I feared in life, everything I hated in other people, falseness and brutality and mindless arrogance (pp. 385, 386).

His self-denunciation tends to go too far in the other direction, as both the Raven and Laura Durand tell him. But when he is stripped of his illusions he does emerge a better person, and finds whatever contentment the dead can have in a ghostly union with Laura.

Jonathan Rebeck, on the other hand, is not a dead man clinging to life but a living man retreating from it into the world of the dead. While he was active in the world as a pharmacist, Mr. Rebeck had tried to help people hide from life's problems by pro-

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viding love philtres and other potions to those who desperately wanted to believe in such things. After his bankruptcy, his little store was replaced by a chain drugstore. He describes it:

> And I thought . . . how funny it all was. Because they were doing the same thing I'd been doing, only with advertising. Their signs said, "We will make you beautiful, we will make you smell good, we will cure your kidney stones and your hemorrhoids and your bad breath and your dandruff and your bad manners." . . . It's wrong to promise magic to people. It was wrong when I did it, and it was wrong for this clean new drugstore (p. 256).

So he retreats to a graveyard and for nineteen years tries to live like the ghosts he envies, even to the extent that he too is bound within the confines of the cemetery and cannot pass the gate. He talks repeatedly of not really being alive (p. 214), or of not being a good standard by which to judge being alive (p. 233), and of not fitting into the world while everyone else apparently does (p. 408). But the ghost of Morris Klapper shows him how he has imprisoned himself:

> But I tell you that you are a living man and that you have deceived yourself. For a man there is no choice between worlds. There never was (p. 410).

Ultimately, Mr. Rebeck leaves the cemetery sitting in a pickup truck wedged between Mrs. Klapper and the big watchman, Campos. Symbolically, Mrs. Klapper, vibrant and sensible Jewish Earth Mother, descends into the underworld to rescue him, abetted by the Cuban Hercules, Campos, who thereby re-enacts the release of Theseus from Hades. But Rebeck really frees himself by overcoming his self-deception. Perhaps, as he himself suspects, he is quite mad and there are no ghosts but only projections of his own inner needs and desires:

> It might be, he thought, that Michael and Laura and every other ghost with whom he had talked and passed time had never existed except as he was lonesome and wanted company (p. 405).

From this point of view, the entire novel has been one long self-deception until at the end Rebeck abandons his self-imposed prison and living grave. It comes to the same thing.

Beagle is not a moral philosopher but a storyteller, but as his characters act and reflect they do make their tortuous way

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through ethical matters. This view of human beings as rationalizing animals that emerge is not altogether bleak. If all of us (the good, the bad, and the indifferent) tend to use our rationalizing faculty to conceal our failings from ourselves and from others, at least it shows that at bottom we do believe in moral judgments, and that we are trying to measure up. And if our illusions are often harmful and need to be shattered, still our capacity for making them up is akin to a nobler human faculty: our ability to create what Joseph Campbell called "myths to live by," and our talent to make fiction that serves as a mirror to reflect, and a lamp to illuminate, the world in which we live.

This essay has given heavy emphasis to moral concerns. Let us conclude by calling to mind some diffident reflections of Jonathan Rebeck: "He realized that a certain oracular solemnity had been wedging its way into his words, but he could think of nothing to say to relieve its weight. . . . He was neither God nor the First Gravedigger . . . " (p. 252). Unlike Mr. Rebeck, Beagle is seldom at a loss for lighter words to leaven the more solemn pronouncements of his characters. Beagle's wit and wry humor are among the many pleasures of reading his work, and I would not want these qualities to be overlooked while I have highlighted other aspects.

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